



More runaways citing economy; Report: Family issues still top reason to flee

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May 12, 2010

Economic hardship is being cited more often as a reason America's youth run away from home, says a report out today.

Three times as many teen runaways cited economics as a factor in 2009 as did so in 2000, according to data by the National Runaway Switchboard, a hotline that handles more than 100,000 calls each year and receives public and private funds. The "Why They Run" report is based on caller data and youth interviews.

The weak economy also helps explain why the number of calls from homeless youth doubled from 739 in 2008 to 1,470 last year, says the hotline's executive director, Maureen Blaha. She says some of the youth (up to age 22) or their parents lost jobs or couldn't get work.

Blaha recalls a teen girl calling because a parent's job loss forced her family to move. "She was angry," Blaha says. "She didn't feel she belonged in the new school."

Rising unemployment and foreclosure rates could account for some of the economic distress calls, says David Finkelhor, director of the University of New Hampshire's Crimes Against Children Research Center.

"It makes sense," he says, but he cautions that the data are not comprehensive enough to be conclusive. In earlier research based on U.S. government data, he found that about 1.7 million youth run away or are kicked out of their home each year, half of them girls.

The report says family dynamics, such as divorce, remains the single biggest factor for youth leaving home, followed by peer or social problems.

"Many say they didn't run away, but they were thrown out," says Michael Pergamit, an economist at the Urban Institute who interviewed 83 teens in Chicago and Los Angeles for the report.

Nearly half, or 48%, told him they were thrown out of their homes; 30% said they ran away; and 22% said it was a mix of the two.

One in five children will run away at least once by age 18, Pergamit found in a separate report released today by the Urban Institute.

Pergamit analyzed the data of 1,168 12-year-olds who were first interviewed in 1997 and then tracked for six years as part of the federally funded National Longitudinal Survey of Youth.

He found that half of the youth who run away do so before 14 and do so at least twice. He says they include slightly more girls than boys and far more white and black youths than Hispanics.

Pergamit says these youth "couch surf" -- first staying with friends and relatives before ending up in shelters or on the street.

"They get money from friends," he says, adding that most don't resort to panhandling, prostitution or selling drugs. Data on runaways, however, are limited, he says. "We don't really know."